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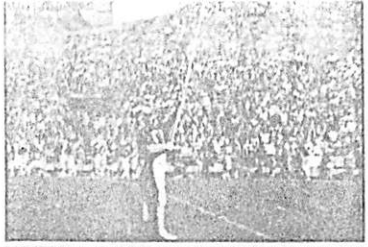

Memories of a miraculous season

Utah County Jou

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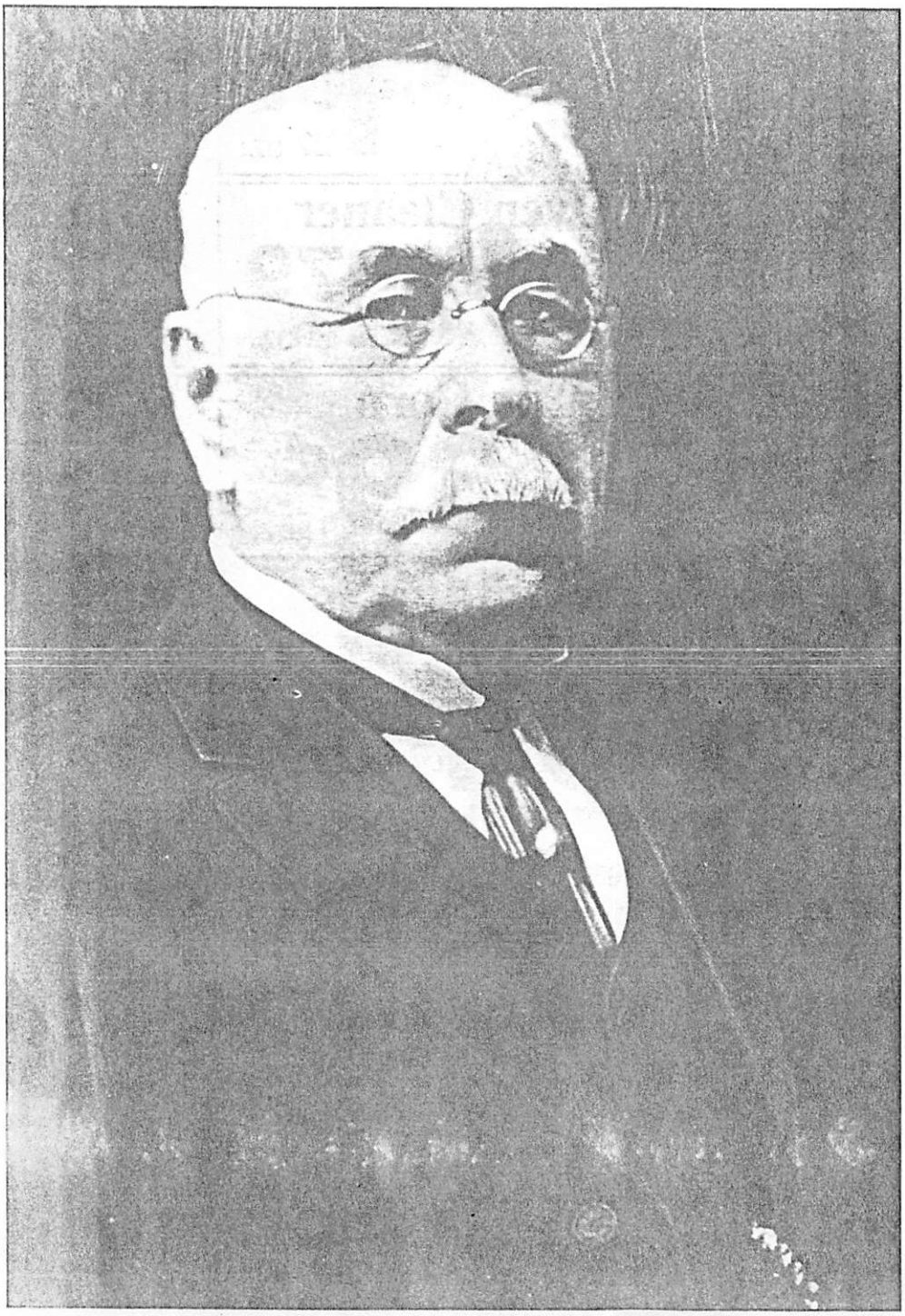
100 Years Ago in Utah County

Uncle Jesse Knight



BYU ARCHIVES

Mining magnate Jesse Knight brought more to Utah Valley than gold and silver

Diane Butler Christensen
Journal Correspondent

There are millionaires and then there are millionaires. Jesse Knight was as unlikely a man as one could hope to find to fit the role of a tycoon, but he was 19th century Utah Valley's most dramatic rags-to-riches story.

In the late 1880's Jesse Knight was a Payson farmer, raised in poverty, who had recently become a "born again" Mormon of sorts. In his youth he had rejected the LDS faith because, in his words, "I was always in sympathy with the weak or with those who seemed unable to defend themselves. Because I felt that some early Latter-day Saints were prejudiced against the few non-Mormons who were among us, I was often in sympathy with the outsiders" (quoted in J. William Knight's *The Jesse Knight Family*).

In 1887, though, his five children became extremely ill with a septic fever caused by drinking contaminated well water. He lost his 17-year-old daughter, Minnie, and the other four came close to following her. During these agonizing weeks, Knight regained his faith and embraced the Mormon cause with a zeal that never diminished throughout the rest of his life.

A year or two later, Jesse Knight had a mystical experience. He had become interested in mining after talking to men traveling to and from the mines in Eureka, and occasionally indulged in some amateur prospecting. One day he was walking alone on the east side of Godiva mountain when, he claimed later, he heard a voice say clearly to him, "This country is here for the Mormons."

Knight became very serious about prospecting at this point, and carefully studied the mines in the area and the type of lime rock that distinguished the successful claims. When he had found a promising location, he enlisted an expert miner

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named Jared Roundy to help him stake the claim. He offered Mr. Roundy a partnership in the mine, but the miner declined, scoffing, "I do not want an interest in a damned old humbug like this."

Knight was amused and named his claim the Humbug Mine. After mortgaging his Payson ranch in 1896 to obtain a $15,000 loan, he began mining operations which proved almost immediately that Knight had struck an incredibly rich vein of ore. His very first shipment contained high grades of gold, silver and lead, and brought him over $11,000.

There seemed to be no doubt after this that Jesse Knight had the Midas touch; he immediately purchased several other mines in the same vicinity as the Humbug and every one brought him an extremely good profit.

Though he made a mistake here and there as a businessman, Knight was a wizard when it came to mining. Not only did he know when to buy properties, he knew when to get rid of them. He unloaded the Humbug Mine, for instance, just before it played out. His disappointed purchaser, Simon Bamberger, later remarked, "Jesse Knight might not have had a revelation when he found the mine, but he surely had one when he sold it" (quoted in *The Bonanza Kings*, by Richard H. Peterson).

Knight happily used a good portion of his considerable riches to benefit the LDS Church, the City of Provo (where he moved his family), Brigham Young University, his own employees, and countless individuals in Utah County. He quickly became known as Uncle Jesse to almost everyone and was a much-beloved figure in the community until his death in 1921.

Uncle Jesse had an enlightened approach to employee relations. The town of Knightville was built in 1897 in the Tintic area to house the miners that worked in the Humbug, and other, mines. It was a unique mining community. No saloons or billiard halls existed there; Knight felt that any man who spent his wages for liquor robbed his family and endangered others, and he would not employ such men.

On the other hand, Uncle Jesse provided the miners with a church, a school, and an amusement hall for wholesome entertainments such as dancing, concerts, and basketball. He also paid his workers 25 cents a day, or more than his competitors, so that they (his miners) could have Sunday off and still receive a fair weekly wage.

Knight was also very conscious of safety standards among his employees, and gave financial assistance to miners who were hospitalized. His paternal manner toward employees was probably caused by his conviction that one of the reasons he had been blessed financially was so that he could provide good jobs for many people.

LDS church. His son, J. William, often related that just before discovering the first rich vein of ore in the Humbug Mine, his father told him that he would one day "save the credit of the church."

This later proved to be the case, when in 1898 he loaned $10,000 to the First Presidency of the Church, who had made an unwise investment with the best of intentions but had as a result found themselves in a great deal of financial trouble.

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Jesse Knight

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Knight also donated money and property to Provo for city improvements and assisted Brigham Young University with a number of generous loans and gifts when the trustees were in desperate need.

Uncle Jesse's soft heart became legendary, and there were those who tried to take advantage of the wealthy benefactor. His son and biographer related that "one morning as Father and Mr. Mangum (Knight's secretary) were in the office going over the day's work an elderly woman from Eureka requested a private interview."

Mangum stepped out, but was almost immediately called back in by Knight, who asked his opinion of a contract the woman wished him to sign which would be very much to her benefit and not at all to his.

"The woman remarked as much to herself as to her listeners, 'Now wouldn't that beat you?' My son told me to get Mr. Knight away from his secretary, because when alone Uncle Jesse is an easy mark.'

"Father chuckled and said, 'So that is what people think of me, is it? Well, I believe in living up to my reputation; hand me a pen, Lester.'"

In these Leona Helmsley-ridden days, we might be excused if we look back at Jesse Knight's approach to business with nostalgia.

We miss you, Uncle Jesse.